# HAMLET.

## AN ATTEMPT TO ASCERTAIN WHETHER THE QUEEN WERE AN ACCESSORY, BEFORE THE FACT, IN THE MURDER OF HER FIRST HUSBAND.

---

*Laertes.* His means of death, . . .

. . . . . .

Cry to be heard, as 'twere from heaven to earth,
That I must call't in question.

*King.* So you shall;
And where th' offence is, let the great axe fall.
I pray you, go with me.

*Hamlet*, act iv. sc. 5.

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# HAMLET.

IN the second volume of his "Notes on Shakspeare," in speaking of the play of "Hamlet," Coleridge says:—"I confess that Shakspeare has left the character of the Queen in an unpleasant perplexity. Was she, or was she not, conscious of the fatricide?" He does not tell us whether by this "consciousness of the fatricide," he meant a knowledge of the intended crime before its commission by Claudius, or only a subsequent discovery of the fact, on the part of the Queen. But, whichever construction be put upon his words, the answer to the question appears to be very far from generally agreed upon amongst the readers of the play.

In the hope of attracting to the subject the attention of those most conversant with the writings of Shakspeare, and so, of obtaining, if it be possible, a solution of the problem, I propose in the present paper to consider the "Hamlet" so far only as it relates to the murder of Hamlet's father; and, having first linked together all the alleged evidences of the Queen's share in the crime in question, I shall proceed to weigh such proofs against those which appear to be in favour of her innocence.

The evidences commonly adduced to prove her participation in the murder are the following:—

1. The fact that she married Claudius within a month after the death of her first husband—act i. sc. 2:—

> Frailty, thy name is woman!—
> A little month; or ere those shoes were old
> With which she follow'd my poor father's body
> Like Niobe, all tears; why she, even she,
> (O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason,
> Would have mourn'd longer)—married with my uncle.

2. Her parade of excessive grief at the funeral of her first husband:—

> With which she follow'd my poor father's body
> Like Niobe, all tears.

3. Her anxiety to convince Hamlet that his father's death was natural—act i. sc. 2:—

*Qu.* Thou know'st, 'tis common; all that live must die,
Passing through nature to eternity.
*Ham.* Ay, madam, it is common.
*Qu.* If it be,
Why seems it so particular with thee?

4. The foreboding of Hamlet shown in the words:—

It is not, nor it cannot come to, good,

in speaking of his mother's "most wicked speed" in contracting the second marriage—act i. sc. 2.

5. Her anxiety to wean Hamlet from his sorrow and to retain him at Elsinore—act i. sc. 2:—

Do not, for ever, with thy vailed lids
Seek for thy noble father in the dust:

and,

Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet:
I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.

6. Hamlet's remark, in speaking of his mother, in his soliloquy after the Ghost's disclosure—act i. sc. 5:—

O most pernicious woman!

7. The Ghost's command to Hamlet—act 1. sc. 5:

But howsoever thou pursu'st this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive,
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven,
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.

8. The two couplets in the play-scene, act iii. sc. 2, and Hamlet's remark interposed:—

*Player Qu.* In second husband let me be accurst;
None wed the second, but who killed the first.
*Hamlet (aside).* Wormwood, wormwood.
*Player Qu.* A second time I kill my husband dead,
When second husband kisses me in bed.

And the dialogue in the interview-scene, act iii. scene 4, ensuing upon Hamlet's accidental slaughter of Polonius:—

*Qu.* O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!
*Ham.* A bloody deed; almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.
*Qu.* As kill a king!
*Ham.* Ay, lady, 'twas my word.

9. The Queen's soliloquy, act iv. scene 5, immediately before her reluctant interview with the distracted Ophelia:—

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss:
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

10. The poetical justice of her fate in dying by poison; the murder of which she is accused having been effected by the same means.

11. The words of Horatio at the end of the play, in act v. scene 2, when he promises to accept the trust reposed in him by the dying Hamlet, and to—

> Speak to the yet unknowing world,
> How these things came about—

where he says:—

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning, and forc'd cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook,
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads: all this can I
> Truly deliver.

The words "accidental judgments" referring, as the accusers of the Queen allege, to the justice of her fate.

Beyond these eleven heads of accusation, I am not aware of any evidences alleged against the Queen; and I now proceed to consider these, *seriatim*.

The accusers of the Queen rely, in the first place, upon the fact that she is first introduced to us as having married Claudius within a month after the death of her former husband, and as trying to persuade Hamlet how "common" his father's death was:—

> Thou know'st, 'tis common; all that live must die,
> Passing through nature to eternity.
> *Ham.* Ay, madam, it is common.
> *Qu.* If it be,
> Why seems it so particular with thee?—

in exactly the same strain as Claudius does—and as begging Hamlet to mourn no longer for his father—and not to go to Wittenberg; —all of which Claudius urges upon him also.

But, I think, the play, throughout the greater part of it, shows us that the Queen was very much under the influence of Claudius, and the "witchcraft of his wit"; and he was undoubtedly very anxious both that Hamlet should forget the father whom he had murdered, and should also stay at the court of Elsinore, that he might watch the form which Hamlet's "melancholy" might assume, in order to his own safety, and to ensure the fact that Hamlet was not, at a distance, plotting to obtain the crown, to which he had a stronger claim than Claudius, as being the next heir of the murdered King, and also as possessing, in a greater degree than Claudius, the "great love" of the "general gender," in an elective monarchy.

This being so, Claudius might very probably, and most certainly would, beg his wife, who had much more influence with Hamlet, her own son, to use this influence to keep him at their court, and to wean him from his sorrow for his father's death.

Nor was Claudius mistaken as to the result; for Hamlet, who had made no reply to his entreaty, accedes at once to his mother's request:—

I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

And this course would appear very plausible in Claudius, who throughout the play affects a very great love for, and interest in, Hamlet, whenever he speaks either to him, or of him to the Queen or his courtiers. He is careful to parade this affection on every possible occasion; and both the Queen and his courtiers appear to be misled by the display, and to believe his pretended love for Hamlet to be real and true.

I think this suggestion—namely, that the Queen was acting under the influence of Claudius in trying to comfort Hamlet and to retain him at Elsinore—is a sufficient vindication of her conduct in this particular; but, if it be not thought so, might she not very naturally, upon her own account, and without any concurrence in the motives of Claudius, use the argument and pursue the course above mentioned towards Hamlet?

We know that she was exceedingly fond of him. Claudius tells us:—

The queen, his mother,
Lives almost by his looks;

she might therefore very naturally endeavour to alleviate his sorrow by the use of the trite consolation which reminds him of the "commonness" and every-day occurrence of death, and also might hope more effectually to console him if he remained near her. She also knew that Claudius had "popp'd in between the election and his hopes," and she, being now the wife of Claudius, had an interest in seeing that Hamlet was not, during his stay at Wittenberg, plotting to recover this lost "election" of himself to the crown of Denmark, to the injury of her present husband. For her own sake, also, she might naturally wish to divert Hamlet's memory from the "noble father" whom she herself was so anxious to forget; and the remembrance of whose excellence would serve at once to remind Hamlet of her fickleness and declension, and to aggravate, by contrast, the deficiencies of her present husband, "whose natural gifts were poor to those of" the murdered King.

The knowledge that Claudius had, most probably through unjust means, but at all events to the injury of Hamlet, procured his own election to the crown, as well as that she had sinned against her son in her infidelity to his father and her incestuous and indecently hasty marriage with his uncle, would most naturally communicate to her intercourse with Hamlet that appearance of uneasiness and deprecation which is attributed by her accusers to a consciousness on her part of participation in the murder of her former husband. The fact of her marrying Claudius within so short a time after the death of her first husband is, of course, no proof of her blood-guilt; and can only, at the most, be taken as affording evidence of a motive on her part for desiring the death in question.

I come now to Hamlet's first soliloquy, in act i. scene 2, in which occurs his description of his mother's grief while following his father's body to the grave:—

> Or ere those shoes were old,
> With which she followed my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears.

It is urged by her accusers, that her parade, as they deem it, of excessive grief on this occasion, whilst, all the while, she had been faithless to her husband, and doubtless intended to marry Claudius directly, is a proof that such sorrow was entirely affected, and designed only to divert the spectators from all suspicion that she had been instrumental in the crime of her husband's death.

But I do not think that this display of excessive sorrow needs to have been altogether, if in any degree, false; or that it suffices to convict her of hypocrisy, much less of murder.

Her character throughout the play appears to be that of an affectionate, weak, vacillating, woman; not by any means altogether bad, nor at all firm of purpose and persistent in following the same course; easily led into sin, and no less easily affected by the remembrance of her sin. Such a woman, having really loved Hamlet the elder, and having her affections seduced by Claudius, might very reasonably be really affected, and acutely so, by the death of a kind and noble husband—"so excellent a king"—whom she had once truly loved, and against whom she had grievously sinned, of which sin his death would painfully remind her; even though both before and after such passionate tears, she were faithless to her marriage vows. There is nothing unnatural or improbable in the expression of real and passionate sorrow for a sin of which there is no real repentance, or intention of repentance, to be testified by relinquishment of the sin in question. So, Macbeth, almost directly after murdering Duncan, wishes that the knocking at the door had the power to wake his victim from the sleep of death, though he just as much as ever intended to seize the golden prize for which he had committed the murder, and to wade forwards through the sea of blood, instead of attempting to retrace his steps. And how does his wife describe him? "Infirm of purpose"! Of course, in this allusion to Macbeth, I mean to infer that the Queen's tears at the grave of her husband in the "Hamlet" were in reality tears of remorse at the remembrance of her sin against the husband then borne dead before her, quite as much as tears of regret at his death. But Hamlet had not, at the time he complains of her apparent hypocrisy, any knowledge of her faithlessness to his father, and consequently was not aware of all her motives for sorrow. Moreover, the tone of Hamlet's mind is just that which exaggerates and abhors the every-day hypocrisy of human life as evinced by the "trappings and the suits of woe," and the want of a corresponding internal sorrow;—but this question—the state of Hamlet's mind—I propose to consider hereafter.

In this same soliloquy, I observe that Hamlet speaks of his mother before he has seen the Ghost, or suspected the murder of the King, in terms of almost as great reprehension as he does after the Ghost's disclosures. Thus, he speaks of the Queen, before he has seen the Ghost, and before he believed her guilty of adultery during the life of his father, in the following words:—

> That it should come to this!
> But two months dead!—nay, not so much, not two:
> So excellent a king; that was, to this,
> Hyperion to a satyr: so loving to my mother
> That he might not let e'en the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!
> Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him,
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on: and yet, within a month,—
> Let me not think on't.
>
> Frailty, thy name is woman!
> A little month; or ere those shoes were old,
> With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
> Like Niobe, all tears;—why she, even she,—
> (O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason,
> Would have mourn'd longer)—married with my uncle,
> My father's brother, but no more like my father,
> Than I to Hercules: within a month;
> Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
> Had left the flushing in her gulled eyes,
> She married.—O, most wicked speed, to post
> With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
> It is not, nor it cannot come to, good.

This, spoken at a time when Hamlet had neither seen the Ghost, nor heard of its appearance, and had not, so far as we know, any suspicion that his father had been murdered, is very nearly as strong in reprehension of his mother's conduct as the terms in which he speaks of her after he has seen the Ghost, and been informed of the murder.

After he has seen the Ghost, it is only "O most pernicious woman!" and this difference in speaking of her is lessened by the considerations that he then knew of the Queen's adultery during the life of his father, and that, consequently, Claudius must have felt sure of obtaining her hand in case he succeeded in removing the only obstacle which stood in the way of their union; and, therefore, Hamlet would feel that the Queen, whether cognizant or not of Claudius's intention to commit the murder, had, at least, by her encouragement and indulgence of his licentious passion, been passively, though perhaps quite unintentionally, instrumental to the murder of her husband. This reflection would be quite enough to make Hamlet, in the bitterness of his grief, burst out into the words:—"O most pernicious woman!" without requiring us to believe that he had understood the Ghost to accuse his mother of a

share in the crime of murder. Again, in Hamlet's interview with his mother long after, in act iii. scene 4, it is only—

> This was your husband: look you now, what follows.
> Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear
> Blasting his wholesome brother.—Have you eyes?
> Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
> And batten on this moor?
> * * * * *
> * * * And what judgment
> Would step from this to this?
> * * * * *
> O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
> If thou can'st mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,—
> And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame,
> When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will;

which is hardly at all more violent in reprehension than the terms he applies to the Queen before he knows of the murder at all.

But of Claudius how different are the terms he uses after he has seen the Ghost! Before he sees the Ghost, Claudius is merely a "satyr"; afterwards, he is "damned villain," "bloody, bawdy, villain."

The words used at the close of the first soliloquy of Hamlet, in speaking of his mother's marriage with Claudius:—"It is not, nor it cannot come to, good," which are used by the accusers of the Queen to prove that Hamlet, before seeing the Ghost, suspected the foul play attending his father's death, and feared that she was concerned in it, seem to me unimportant. Of course, the Queen's conduct was very far from "good," even if she were innocent of the murder, nor could such an "o'erhasty" and incestuous marriage be hoped to "come to good," *i.e.* to be blessed.

The first real foreboding on Hamlet's part appears to be his remark after he has heard of the Ghost's appearance from Horatio, act i. sc. 2:—

> My father's spirit in arms! all is not well;
> I doubt some foul play.

I would next direct the attention of my readers to the dialogue which takes place between Polonius and Reynaldo in act ii. scene 1, in which Polonius, before sending his servant to Paris to play the spy upon his son, directs him how to entrap the companions of Laertes into information respecting the habits and amusements of their friend, by accusing him falsely of certain specified vices. Polonius concludes by explaining to his servant the object of these false accusations against his son:—

> See you now;
> Your bait of falsehood takes this carp of truth:

> And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,
> With windlaces, and with assays of bias,
> By indirections, find directions out:
> So, by my former lecture and advice,
> Shall you my son.

What purpose does this scene serve? Is it designed merely to acquaint us with the character of Polonius, and to show us his intense enjoyment of his own imbecile craft? Is it not possible that the poet intended these directions of the old courtier to subserve another purpose, and one more nearly affecting the main interest of the play:—namely—to warn his audience, not to attach to the accusations of the subsequent play-scene (act iii. sc. 2) greater weight than they deserve; but to consider them also only as "windlaces, and assays of bias," to drag forth the truth, and that the significance to be attached to these tests was to be decided only by the degree of success which attended their operation? If I am right in this conjecture, it detracts very greatly from the force of the two couplets in the play-scene, and the dialogue in the interview-scene (quoted at the commencement of my paper, No. 8), upon which the alleged guilt of the Queen is chiefly made to rest.

The play-scene I shall consider in its place; but I return now to the Ghost's narrative to Hamlet. What does he tell Hamlet of the murder? Is there a single word in it which attaches the guilt of blood to the Queen? Not one;—it is only—

> The serpent, that did sting thy father's life,
> Now wears his crown—
> * * * * * * *
> Sleeping within mine orchard,
> My custom always in the afternoon,
> Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
> With juice of cursed hebenon in a phial,
> And in the porches of mine ears did pour
> The leperous distilment. * * *
> * * * * * * * *
> Thus, was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand,
> Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch'd.—

The very mention of the "queen" as one of the objects of which the King was robbed, appears to me to infer that she was not one of the robbers; for there seems something absurd in the construction of the passage on a contrary supposition.

What is the Ghost's charge to Hamlet?—

> If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not;
> Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
> A couch for luxury, and damned incest.—
> But, howsoever thou pursu'st this act,
> Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
> Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven,
> And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
> To prick and sting her.

The thing which he was not to "bear," was the then present defilement of the royal bed, though the "act" which he was charged to "pursue" may be the joint crime of incest and murder; but there is nothing in the passage to prove that the Ghost commanded Hamlet not to "pursue" the crime of murder as against the Queen—or to imply that she was guilty of that crime; inasmuch as though the "act" to be pursued included the murder, we know that it included the "damned incest" also, in regard to which the guilt of the Queen is admitted; and this deprives the words in question of any force which they would otherwise have had as an assumption of her guilt in the crime of murder.

I think the Ghost's rage against the Queen would have been extreme if she had had any hand in his murder, and would not have allowed of any such compassion on his part towards her, as is shown in the concluding words of his charge to Hamlet:—

> Leave her to heaven,
> And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
> To prick and sting her—

into repentance, as we may fairly assume, not only from the Ghost's tender regret in alluding to her "declension" on this occasion, but also from his direction to Hamlet in the interview-scene (act iii. sc. 4):—

> But, look! amazement on thy mother sits:
> O! step between her and her fighting soul;
> Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.
> Speak to her,* Hamlet.

Again, in what terms does the Ghost describe the Queen in this his first interview with Hamlet? Only as

> my most seeming-virtuous queen,

and as

> lust, though to a radiant angel link'd.

And in the interview between the Queen and Hamlet, the Ghost alludes to her as a "weakest body."

All this, when contrasted with the terms he applies to Claudius, is noticeable as referring only to lust and weakness, and in no wise to blood-guiltiness.

The order of the Ghost's narrative is also remarkable—the first mention of the murder—the criminal passion towards the Queen on the part of Claudius as one cause of the murder—the short, and almost tender digression of regret at her frailty—"O Hamlet, what a falling off was there!" as though he could hardly bear to reflect how her sin had blinded her eyes, and caused her

> to decline
> Upon a wretch, whose natural gifts were poor
> To those of mine!—

* In the edition of 1603, mentioned at the end of my paper, the Ghost's pity is still more strongly expressed:—

> Thy mother's fearful, and she stands amaz'd:
> Speak to her, Hamlet, for her sex is weak;
> Comfort thy mother, Hamlet, think on me.

And then the return to Claudius and his "cursed hebenon"—the aggravation of the crime as committed by a brother's hand, and as cutting him off—

> Even in the blossoms of his sin,
> Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd;—

and the manner in which the remembrance of all this, and the consciousness of his present consequent sufferings, inflame his rage against Claudius, and cause him to charge Hamlet to

> Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,

accompanied by a caution not to punish the Queen for the "luxury and damned incest."

I consider that the Ghost's narrative implies the guilt of adultery in the Queen, during the life of her first husband. It was while she was "to a radiant angel link'd," and while she could "sate herself in a celestial bed," that she yet further "preyed on garbage"; and this fact disarms the words addressed by Hamlet to his mother, in his distant interview with her (act iii. sc. 4), of the force which they might otherwise have had. The words which I mean are:—

> Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
> And batten on this moor?

Had it not been for the inference to be drawn, as I think, from the Ghost's narrative—that the Queen had been faithless to her marriage vows during the life of her husband—this "leave to feed" might perhaps have been considered to imply the guilt of murder in the Queen, as charging her with having by her own act caused the cessation of this "food," and not as implying that the "food" was removed from her by the stroke of natural death, in which latter case it would have left her, and not she it.

Hamlet was not aware of this adultery until after he had seen the Ghost; because, before that, he accuses her of "posting to incestuous sheets," only after the death of his father.

We come now to Hamlet's discourse with Ophelia (act iii. sc. 1), which is very remarkable as bearing only and entirely upon the unchastity of women. "For the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty [*i.e.* chastity] from what it is to a bawd, than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness; this was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof." In which he seems to intimate that the temptations incident to his mother's beauty had triumphed over her chastity, instead of her chastity having refined and spiritualized her beauty: he represents it as a struggle between the two, in which the baser kind of ornament, the sensuous beauty, overcame and assimilated to its lower self, the nobler ornament of spiritual purity. He goes on—"You should not have believed me [that I did love you], for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock, but we shall relish of it. I loved you not," —implying that, being the son of his false and vicious mother, he

was necessarily as such tainted with her infidelity and untruthfulness, and that no inoculation of virtue could purify the son of such a mother from his inherent and inherited natural deceitfulness and impurity of appetite.

His questions, "Are you honest [*i.e.* chaste]? Are you fair?" show how his mother's frailty had led to a natural association in his mind between personal beauty and unchastity in woman, and made him believe that they were inseparable.

Now, the same reason which may be conjectured to have kept Hamlet silent towards his mother, during the subsequent interview with her (act iii. sc. 4), upon the subject of her supposed participation in the murder of her husband, would in no way have operated to keep him from hinting at such conjectured blood-guilt in these "dark sayings" to Ophelia; in which he may be supposed to show, rather to the reader of the play, than to the heart-broken girl who could extract no meaning from his words, his sad knowledge of his mother's infidelity, and its effects in rendering him distrustful of the seeming virtue of a fair woman. Why, then, does he not darkly hint to Ophelia at the much graver crime of murder, into which he is supposed to believe that his mother has fallen? I think the entire absence of all such hints in this conversation affords a strong presumption that he held no such belief.

So again, he says to her:—

> Wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them;

"monsters" meaning horned men, *i.e.* cuckolds—a very common synonym amongst dramatists. Yet, if wives commonly murdered their husbands, the husbands were something more pitiable than cuckolds, and would avoid marriage for some stronger reason than a fear of the infidelity of their wives.

I have omitted, in its proper place, to observe, that Hamlet, in proposing to himself (act ii. sc. 2) to have the "mousetrap" acted as a test of the guilt of his uncle, never makes the least mention of his mother as a party to be tried by the same test. Yet, is this likely? Had he really and fully suspected his mother, would he not have been most painfully anxious to have his suspicions removed, or, if it must be, confirmed? A mother whom he so dearly loved? Had he so understood the Ghost, would he not have put that spirit's "honesty" to this test also? Yet he seems to think of nothing but the testing of his uncle's guilt:—

> I 'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father,
> Before mine uncle; I 'll observe his looks;
> I 'll tent him to the quick; if he but blench,
> I know my course.
> * * * * * * *
> * * * the play 's the thing,
> Wherein I 'll catch the conscience of the king.

So, in his directions to Horatio, in act iii. sc. 2:—

> There is a play to-night before the king;
> One scene of it comes near the circumstance,
> Which I have told thee, of my father's death;
> I prythee, when thou seest that act afoot,
> Even with the very comment of thy soul,
> Observe mine uncle; if his occulted guilt
> Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
> It is a damned ghost that we have seen,
> And my imaginations are as foul
> As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note;
> For I, mine eyes will rivet to his face,
> And after, we will both our judgments join
> In censure of his seeming.

Surely, if he had really suspected his mother also, he would have had a much better chance of detecting the common crime of murder, to watch both the suspected criminals, and the glances which might, nay, which must, pass between them, on seeing the mirror of their joint crime. And, if he had ever hinted to Horatio any suspicion of the Queen's guilt, would not the latter certainly have suggested the advisability of extending their observation to her also? Yet he does nothing of the sort; his reply has reference to Claudius only:—

> Well, my lord;
> If he steal aught the whilst the play is playing,
> And 'scape detecting, I will pay the theft.

I may be accused of inconsistency in my defence of the Queen, because I suggest hereafter that the two couplets in the play-scene, and the remark in Hamlet's subsequent interview with his mother, were inserted and made by him as a sort of side-wind-tests of his mother's guilt. But all that I mean here is, that he never so suspects her of blood-guilt as to disclose to Horatio his intention of testing such supposed guilt, even to this trifling extent; nay, never so much as confesses so dreadful a suspicion even to himself, as to soliloquise upon it, as he does above, as regards his uncle's guilt, in the lines:—

> I 'll have these players
> Play something like the murder of my father,
> Before mine uncle, &c.

I also notice, that before the King has been reminded of his guilt by the play-scene, his conscience is at work. Thus, in act iii. sc. 1, when Polonius says:—

> We are oft to blame in this,—
> 'Tis too much prov'd,—that, with devotion's visage,
> And pious action, we do sugar o'er
> The devil himself,—

Claudius replies—

> O 'tis too true. (*Aside*)—How smart
> A lash that speech doth give my conscience!
> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plastering art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it,
> Than is my deed to my most painted word.
> O heavy burden!

There are no such soliloquies of guilt on the part of the Queen before the play-scene—if at all—(which I doubt) as respects the crime of murder—her only soliloquy of uneasiness being the one in act iv. sc. 5, beginning—

> To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is—

which I shall consider in its place.

In act ii. sc. 2, the King and Queen are alone together. The King says (of Polonius):—

> He tells me, my dear Gertrude, he hath found
> The head and source of all your son's distemper.

To which the Queen replies:—

> I doubt, it is no other but the main:
> His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage.

Would one of two murderers, alone together, speak of their joint crime as "his father's death"? Whilst the phrase "o'erhasty marriage" shows that her conscience was at work? Does the King alone so speak of his crime?—(Act iii. scene 3.) Listen to his wretched outcry:—

> O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
> It hath the primal, eldest curse upon 't,
> A brother's murder! * * *
> * * * * * * *
> What if this cursed hand
> Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
> Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
> To wash it white as snow? * *
> * * * * * * *
> Then I 'll look up:
> My fault is past. But, O! what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder!
> That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
> Of those effects for which I did the murder,
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

Here is no periphrasis! no calling the murder "his father's death"!

Before the play-scene, Hamlet's mind is still oozing out its remembrance of his mother's infidelity, in his reply to Ophelia:—

> *Oph.* 'Tis brief, my lord,—
> *Ham.* As woman's love.

I cannot suppose that, had he understood the Ghost to charge his mother with murder, his mind would have been so entirely filled with the consideration of her infidelity alone, as to preclude all reflection on, and consequent allusion to, the much graver crime of murder. Nor do I consider it any answer to this objection, to say that he contemplated the crime of murder, so far as the Queen might have been concerned in it, as a necessary consequence of, and involved in, her sin of infidelity. The latter sin had been committed during the lifetime of Hamlet the elder, evidently without his suspecting it; and therefore there was very little advantage to be gained by the Queen, in proceeding to the murder, to counterbalance the disadvantages attendant upon the commission of so dangerous a crime; whereas Claudius obtained, not only undisputed possession of the Queen's person, but also the object of his more serious ambition—the crown and kingdom. Nor does Hamlet's reflection upon Claudius's incest ever cause him to lose sight of his blood-guiltiness in reflecting upon the lesser sin. Not at all—he always classes the murder and incest of Claudius together:—"He that hath kill'd my king, and whor'd my mother"—"bloody, bawdy villain"—"remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain."

It is noticeable also that Hamlet always classes his mother amongst the sufferers by the act of murder, and not together with the supposed other perpetrator of it:—"I that have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd"—"He that hath kill'd my king, and whor'd my mother:"—thus adopting nearly the same classification as the Ghost, who places the Queen amongst the possessions of which the act of murder deprived him, and not coupling her with the perpetrator of that act:—

> Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand,
> Of life, of crown, of queen at once dispatch'd.

I now come to the play-scene (act iii. sc. 2), upon the two couplets in which, and the remark interposed, the supposed guilt of the Queen is chiefly made to rest. These couplets are—

> ***Player Queen.*** In second husband let me be accurst;
> None wed the second, but who kill'd the first.
> ***Hamlet (aside).*** Wormwood, wormwood.
> ***Player Queen.*** A second time I kill my husband dead,
> When second husband kisses me in bed.

And, in answer to these couplets and remark, I say that the whole of the play-scene must be regarded as an experiment to discover the guilt of the supposed murderer or murderers of the deceased King; and although Hamlet might not have understood from the Ghost, or have believed, that his mother were guilty of the murder, and although the main tests were designed for Claudius, yet he might, not unnaturally, shocked as he was, and revolted at his discovery of his mother's infidelity, have determined by a side-wind, at the same time, to apply the murder-test less fully to her.

I say that Polonius's directions to Reynaldo (act ii. sc. 1), on the manner of falsely charging Laertes with vice, in order to prove whether he were indulging in it (and the very sorts of vice were to be specified—the charge was to be made most precise and direct), ought to be allowed to have their influence on the reader in the consideration of this play-scene.

I say that Hamlet himself has cautioned us that we should not attach to his suspicions, or consequently to his remarks, more weight than they deserve (act ii. sc. 2) :—

> The spirit, that I have seen,
> May be the devil; and the devil hath power
> T' assume a pleasing shape; yea, and, perhaps,
> Out of my weakness, and my melancholy,
> As he is very potent with such spirits,
> Abuses me to damn me. I 'll have grounds
> More relative than this:—the play 's the thing
> Wherein I 'll catch the conscience of the king.

This frame of mind, this "weakness" and "melancholy"—the utter disgust of life, expressed in his first soliloquy—his regarding the heavens as merely a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours," and the world as

> an unweeded garden,
> That grows to seed; things rank, and gross in nature,
> Possess it merely—

must also be allowed to have their due weight in our consideration of Hamlet's suspicions; who, in his utter revulsion of feeling at discovering his mother's frailty, is exceedingly likely, in his melancholy, and distrust of all mankind, to colour her sin more deeply than there was any ground for doing.

Exactly thus he deals with Ophelia. Regarding her as merely a representative and type of female humanity, that womanhood which thitherto had been to him so glorious and divinely enchanting, and which he had worshipped, in Ophelia's person, with a "love" exceeding that of "forty thousand brothers," but which, by a shock so awful and unlooked for, had been suddenly discovered to be angelic only in appearance [like Lear's, "But to the girdle do the gods inherit; beneath is all the fiend's"]—with the violent reaction natural upon so dreadful a discovery, he rebounds to the opposite extreme; and all his great love being thus turned to poison, he regards her simply as the type of this whitened sepulchre—womankind; and pours out on her, as the representative of her deceitful sex, the awful phials of his wrath.

This question, viz., the state of Hamlet's mind, and the extent to which his mental vision was distorted by the shock consequent on the discovery of the murder of his father, and of his mother's guilty connection with the murderer, is a most important element in the consideration of my subject, because the couplets in the play-scene are, as I suppose, some of those "dozen or sixteen lines" which

Hamlet himself had interpolated into "the murder of Gonzago," and the remark in the interview-scene is made by him also; and because the charges against the Queen, specified at my commencement, and numbered 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8, and which contain all that is of any importance against her, all reach us through Hamlet's lips alone. As illustrations of his state of mind, he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that "Denmark is a prison"; that the heavens are "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours"; and he has already, before he knew of the murder at all, and while only shocked at his father's death, and disgusted by his mother's marriage with Claudius, described the world as "an unweeded garden, possessed merely by things rank and gross in nature." But here I prefer to quote what Coleridge has said upon the subject:—

"One of Shakspeare's modes of creating characters is, to conceive any one intellectual or moral faculty in morbid excess, and then to place himself, Shakspeare, thus mutilated or diseased, under given circumstances. In Hamlet he seems to have wished to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds,—an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds. In Hamlet this balance is disturbed: his thoughts and the images of his fancy are far more vivid than his actual perceptions; and his very perceptions, instantly passing through the medium of his contemplations, acquire, as they pass, a form and a colour not naturally their own. The effect of this overbalance of the imaginative power is beautifully illustrated in the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind, which, unseated from its healthy relation, is constantly occupied with the world within, and abstracted from the world without; giving substance to shadows, and throwing a mist over all commonplace actualities."

Just so I suppose him to see everything through the dark medium of his uncle's guilt and his mother's frailty; and it is most natural that this jaundiced frame of mind should lead him to exaggerate the sin of his mother; and that, knowing her infidelity, he should go on to entertain gloomy fears as to her freedom from blood-guilt. Phantom-fears, however, which he shrank, as I think, from communicating to Horatio, and scarcely dared, on reflection, to confess even to himself, though still sufficiently distressed by them to cause him, in order to make his "assurance" of her innocence "doubly sure," to insert the two couplets in the play-scene, and to make the remark to his mother in his interview with her in act iii. sc. 4:—

*Queen.* O, what a rash and bloody deed is this!
*Hamlet.* A bloody deed;—almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king, and marry with his brother.

I think that the remarks of Hamlet to his mother, and his actions and words respecting her, ought to be considered only in conjunction with the foregoing reflections as to his state of mind, and not,

as is too often the case, as if they were the impartial declarations of a chorus, employed to inform the minds of the spectators of the real state of the case. So, in remarking upon Claudius's words in act iv. sc. 5:—

> There 's such divinity doth hedge a king, &c.,—

Coleridge says:—"Proof, as indeed all else is, that Shakspeare never intended us to see the King with Hamlet's eyes; though I suspect the managers have long done so."

That the whole test of the play-scene is not exactly fitted to the existing case, is proved by the fact that the Player-King is murdered before the murderer (who is his nephew, and not brother,) makes love to the Player-Queen, which does not agree with the Ghost's narrative of the facts. The Ghost describes Claudius as having

> won to his shameful lust
> The will of my most seeming virtuous queen,

before—

> Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,
> With juice of cursed hebenon in a phial,
> And in the porches of mine ear did pour
> The leperous distilment.

So Hamlet has before told us that the representation was only to be "something like the murder of my father."

In the play-scene, it is noticeable how each one of the guilty spectators is dwelling upon his and her own share in the crimes represented, and how Hamlet avails himself of the opportunity afforded by their remarks to drive the iron yet deeper into their souls. The Queen says, of the Player-Queen's professions of affection for her husband, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks," and Hamlet blasts her with the scoff, "Ay, but she 'll keep her word,"—thus reminding his mother of her parade of love towards her murdered husband, which he has elsewhere described in the words:—

> Heaven and earth!
> Must I remember? Why, she would hang on him
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on; and yet within a month, &c.

The King's conscience is troubled with the foreboding of some darker accusation. He inquires—"Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence?" and Hamlet stabs him to the quick with the reply—"Oh! they do but jest! poison in jest!" and then—"But what of that? Your majesty, and we that have free souls, it touches us not; let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung." How keen is the satire! how well he knew what pangs Claudius was suffering in feeling that his "soul" was no longer "free," as we hear the wretched murderer in his retirement directly afterwards exclaiming—

> O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
> Art more engaged;

and that this stab told, we know by Hamlet's question to Horatio

afterwards—"Didst perceive? upon the talk of the poisoning," and not upon the acting of it subsequently.

I think the Queen is entitled to the benefit of the consideration here suggested, namely, that her susceptibility to the representation in the play-scene is confined entirely to the crime of infidelity to her deceased husband, and that Hamlet's answer to her remark is restricted within the same limits; whereas, with regard to Claudius, it is exactly the reverse, and has reference only to the "poisoning."

When the catastrophe of the play-scene comes, where the poisoning is represented, it is Claudius only who seems alarmed. The Queen appears to make no movement until after Claudius has risen; and then it is only to inquire into the stir made by her husband.

The text is as follows:—

*Oph.* The king rises.
*Ham.* What! frighted with false fire?
*Queen.* How fares my lord?
*Pol.* Give o'er the play.
*King.* Give me some light;—away!—

It seems to me that Shakspeare, in making Ophelia tell us that "the king rises," followed by the Queen's inquiry, "How fares my lord?" meant clearly to intimate the Queen's innocence of, and consequent indifference to, the vision of the murder just presented to her eyes. Would not she have also shrunk from the sight, had she been implicated in the crime represented? Had she a more perfect command over her feelings, and more skill in concealing her alarm, than the crafty Claudius, whose whole life is one great lie?

In the dialogue between Hamlet and Horatio, directly after the play-scene, their remarks upon the obvious effect of the representation refer to Claudius only:—

*Hamlet.* Didst perceive? upon the talk of the poisoning.—
*Horatio.* I did very well note him.

Why did not Horatio, as well as Hamlet, watch the Queen also, if Hamlet really believed her to be guilty? Hamlet's remark, "Oh good Horatio! I'll take the ghost's word for a thousand pound"—would also seem to imply that this "word," now proved to be true, charged Claudius alone with the guilt of murder, since no action of the Queen had confirmed such a charge in relation to herself.

What is the effect of the play-scene on Claudius? It utterly oversets him, and sends him weeping to his knees. (Act iii. sc. 3.) Would he, then, have dared, if the Queen had been an accomplice in the murder, and she so infirm of purpose as she was, and so extremely fond of Hamlet, and so evidently subject to his superior intellect, to have allowed this weak, fond mother, directly after seeing her crime mirrored, to be submitted to the test of a searching interview with this clever son of the murdered man?—who, moreover, had just shown the King that he more than suspected the foul play attending his father's death?—Would Claudius himself

have dared to undergo the test of this interview? and was the Queen made of less "penetrable stuff"? Not, if we credit the Ghost of her murdered husband, who tells us, in reference to her, that:—

Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.

Nor would there have been any difficulty in relinquishing the proposed interview. The only persons informed of the proposal were Claudius, the Queen, and Polonius. Hamlet was not invited to the interview at all, until after the play-scene was concluded (by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—act iii. sc. 2). Claudius himself was so "frighted with false fire," that he could not endure the torture of the play-scene to the end—but risked the betrayal of his guilt, rather than sit it out; and so, his guilt "spills itself in fearing to be spilt." And yet, he submits this weak mother—who he tells us "lives almost by his (Hamlet's) looks," and who Polonius tells us is "made partial by nature" to her son—no longer to "false fire," but to the real fire of Hamlet's searching mind! This one fact appears to me to preclude the possibility of believing that the Queen was consentient to or cognizant of the murder.

What utter madness it would have been, thus to have placed in Hamlet's power the only confirmation which his suspicions then needed to ripen them into perfect certainty!—a confirmation which he would have been most certain to extract from his mother.

And, granting that Claudius were such a fool (which he was not, for the Ghost describes the "witchcraft of his wit"), could he have persuaded the Queen to undergo this test, if she had just seen the mirror of her crime held up? Most surely not. She is not so fond of these scenes. She says, when Ophelia wants to see her after the death of Polonius, "I will not speak with her." So, surely, would she, if guilty, have refused o see Hamlet, had Claudius been fool enough to allow her to be put to this trial.

But supposing, for the sake of the argument, that the Queen were an accomplice in the murder, and that Claudius chose, for some unimaginable reason, to run the risk of submitting her to the test of an interview with Hamlet, would he not have taken care that such interview should take place without the audience of any third party unacquainted with the murder, and who might learn from the dialogue between the Queen and her son, that the late King had been murdered? Claudius feared, we know, that "the hatch and the disclose" of Hamlet's apparent madness would be "some danger" to himself, and this interview was designed for the especial purpose of eliciting the disclosure. Yet he not only allows, but commands, Polonius to be within hearing; and there is every reason to believe, as I shall endeavour hereafter to show, that Polonius was ignorant of the murder. The Queen also consents that Polonius shall overhear the dialogue, which would have been as objectionable to her, had she been participant in the murder, as to Claudius.

The other view of the subject appears to me infinitely more reasonable, namely, that the Queen knew nothing of the murder;

and that Claudius, knowing this, and anxious to learn whether the horrible vision of discovery which the play-scene had just suggested to him were intentional or accidental, tremblingly employs her for the purpose of deciding this momentous question.

Whilst the experiment is being made, Claudius, in his retirement, shows us the interior of his heart in his soliloquy:—

> O! my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
> It hath the primal, eldest curse upon 't,
> A brother's murder! * * * * *
> * * * * * * *
> * * * * What if this cursed hand
> Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
> Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
> To wash it white as snow?
> * * * * * * *
> Then, I 'll look up;
> My fault is past.—But, O! what form of prayer
> Can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder!—
> That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
> Of those effects for which I did the murder,
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

This soliloquy is very remarkable throughout, as not making the least allusion to any accomplice in his crime. He speaks of himself as the sole perpetrator of the murder:—

> since I am still possess'd
> Of those effects for which I did the murder.

If the Queen had been participant in the crime, would he not have availed himself of the miserable consolation of accusing her jointly with himself, and of reflecting that he was not alone in the sin, but that his Queen was in the same condemnation as himself? —a consolation, which, groundless as it really is, never fails to be applied to themselves by persons in the position of Claudius. His feeling of solitariness in his crime appears to me to be a marked feature of his soliloquy—his knowledge that he could not alleviate the dreadful burthen of his crime, by attributing a part of it to any other person. And it seems to me that, even if he had not at first intended in his soliloquy to devolve any part of his burthen on the Queen, still the mention of "my queen" as one of the objects gained by his commission of the murder, would have reminded him that he was not alone in his crime, had she been participant in it. Just as the dying Front-de-Bœuf in Scott's "Ivanhoe" demands that Ulrica shall be the sharer of his agonies, on the ground that she had been "the foul provoker, the more foul rewarder of the deed—let her, as well as I, taste of the tortures which anticipate hell!"

Before I consider the interview between Hamlet and his mother, immediately after the play-scene, I would observe, that the interview itself had not originated with Claudius, but with Polonius,

as is proved by the words of the latter to Claudius, in act iii. scene 1:—

> My lord, do as you please:
> But if you hold it fit, after the play,
> Let his queen mother all alone entreat him
> To show his grief; let her be round with him:
> And I 'll be placed, so please you, in the ear
> Of all their conference. If she find him not,
> To England send him.

And this, although it appears from the dialogue between the same speakers in act iii. sc. 4, that the proposal for overhearing the effect of this interview between Hamlet and his mother had first come from Claudius. Polonius says to him:—

> My lord, he 's going to his mother's closet;
> Behind the arras I 'll convey myself
> To hear the process; I 'll warrant she 'll tax him home:
> And, as you said, and wisely was it said,
> 'Tis meet that some more audience than a mother,
> Since nature makes them partial, should o'erhear
> The speech, of vantage.

Which two dialogues are a proof how very little sympathy of action there was between Claudius and the Queen—the former of whom, we here see planning a scheme for discovering the cause of Hamlet's wildness, in concert with a courtier who was no party to the murder, and in fact, practising upon, and making use of, his alleged co-murderess for the discovery in question! Is not this a most improbable presumption, that Polonius would have been in the confidence of Claudius, to the exclusion of a participator in the crime? This surely would be a dangerous game for one of two murderers to play.

And now I return to the Queen, who is waiting to hold this interview with Hamlet; who, in approaching her chamber, tells us that he intends to go to the fullest length of speech which was possible to him—"to speak daggers, but use none,"—"to be cruel"—and says:—

> How in my speech soever she be shent,
> To give them seals, never my soul consent;

which most clearly expresses his deliberate intention to be as severe of speech as possible, but not to reduce his speech to action.

So, he approaches her chamber, determined to "speak daggers" to her. What dagger would have been so sharp as an accusation of murder?—an accusation which he never brings; and only suggests, in his reply to her outcry upon his stabbing Polonius behind the arras:—

> O' what a rash and bloody deed is this!

when he answers:—

> A bloody deed;—almost as bad, good mother,
> As kill a king, and marry with his brother;

which words, the only ones which can possibly be construed into a direct charge of murder as against the Queen, I class with the two couplets in the play-scene, as being a further and final test of his mother's guilt; and then appears to me to be confirmed in her mind the hideous suspicion that her husband had been murdered. "As kill a king?" she cries, horror-stricken at hearing to what an extent of crime her encouragement of Claudius's guilty passion had led, and that she had married a blood-stained man!

So, after the play-scene she is described by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as "struck into amazement and admiration" at Hamlet's "behaviour" during the play-scene, in which the first dreadful vision of blood-guilt had been suggested to her!

When the Queen cried out, "As kill a king?" I apprehend that Hamlet saw nothing in her behaviour to confirm the suspicion suggested in his words; inasmuch as he never, throughout the remainder of the interview, makes the slightest further allusion to any blood-guilt on her part; but entirely concentrates his force on the charge of infidelity to her deceased husband, and incest, which he iterates and reiterates in every possible form, and pictures the sin with all his great eloquence. Would this have been a fulfilment of his before-expressed threats:—

> Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge:
> You go not 'till I set you up a glass
> Where you may see the inmost part of you;

and again:—

> Leave wringing of your hands. Peace! sit you down
> And let me wring your heart: for so I shall,
> If it be made of penetrable stuff.

Would his picture of her adultery have represented "the inmost part" of her, if she had been further guilty of the murder? Or would a charge of adultery have "wrung her heart," if her conscience had accused her also of murder? Why should he dilate so enormously upon the breach of her marriage vows, and leave the far greater crime of murder so lightly touched? Why does he not use this more trenchant weapon, if her guilt had exposed her to its attacks?

Again, when she tries to bully him, by asking:—

> What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue,
> In noise so rude against me?

Hamlet would, most surely, if he could, have out-heroded her brag with the charge of murder; yet his reply is only:—

> Such an act,
> That blurs the grace and blush of modesty;
> Calls virtue, hypocrite; takes off the rose
> From the fair forehead of an innocent love,

And sets a blister there; makes marriage vows
As false as dicers' oaths: O! such a deed
As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul; and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words:
* * * * * * * *
O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,
And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame,
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
And reason panders will.—

Which is very noticeable in its reiteration of her immodesty and licentious passion—and in its allusion only to the breach of her "marriage vows," and to her having, by the "act" which he reprobates, destroyed the essence of her "contraction," and disgraced the sacrament of marriage.

When he has made these repeated charges, she appears to me, not to have room in her conscience for the remembrance of any deeper crime. She says of the words quoted above:—

These words, like daggers, enter in mine ears;—

but there would have been "daggers," in comparison with which these would have been pointless, had she been guilty of murder. Yet she seems to have reached the bottom of her grief for her sin, in reflecting on her infidelity to her deceased lord; and would she not have gone back in her mind to the still greater sin of murder, had she been guilty of it? She declares—

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain—

and evidences the sincerity of her repentance, by the wish to amend—"What shall I do?"—and her acceptance of his reproof by promising to keep his counsel; which she vows most solemnly to do, and keeps her vow. And now her knowledge of Claudius's guilt of murder is perfected, and her desertion of him evidenced by her vow to keep silence about Hamlet's discovery of the murder, is the immediate consequence of such knowledge.

Towards the close of the interview between Hamlet and his mother, and during the presence of the Ghost, when the Queen says to Hamlet, "To whom do you speak this?" after he had already addressed the Ghost, "Do you not come your tardy son to chide," thus showing her that he supposed his father's spirit to be before them, it proves, I think, how very little susceptible she was of any consciousness of foul play towards her husband on the part of herself; particularly coupled with her words: "This bodily creation, ecstasy is very cunning in;" and Hamlet's silence, as to the murder, on alluding to "his father in his habit as he lived," is all, I think, confirmatory of her innocence of blood-guilt.

So, I think, is the Ghost's tenderness of address in referring to her:—

> But look! amazement on thy mother sits;
> O! step between her and her fighting soul,
> Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works:
> Speak to her, Hamlet.

And these words of considerate kindness are the last uttered by the spirit. Very kind of him, if she had murdered him! Very different also from his direction to Hamlet to revenge his murder on Claudius: a direction which at that moment he had again appeared for the very purpose of enforcing:—

> *Ghost.* Do not forget. This visitation
> Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.

Which may fairly lead us to conclude, that, had the Ghost chanced to come into the presence of Claudius, his rage would have been extreme at the sight of that "incestuous, that adulterate beast;" and that he would assuredly have shown no such consideration for him, as he does for the Queen.

It is remarkable also that the Queen is the only person of all those before whom the Ghost appears to whom the apparition is invisible. On the platform it is seen by Marcellus, Bernardo, and Horatio, who have no concern in the murder, and is always visible to them whenever it appears, as also it is to Hamlet. But when the spirit appears to him, during this interview with his mother, she never sees the apparition at all:—

> *Ham.* Save me, and hover o'er me with your wings,
> You heavenly guards!—What would you, gracious figure?
> *Qu.* Alas! he 's mad.

And again:—

> *Qu.* Alas! how is 't with you,
> That you do bend your eye on vacancy,
> And with th' incorporal air do hold discourse?
> * * * * * * * *
> * * * * Whereon do you look?

And again:—

> *Qu.* To whom do you speak this?
> *Ham.* Do you see nothing there?
> *Qu.* Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.
> *Ham.* Nor did you nothing hear?
> *Qu.* No, nothing but ourselves.
> *Ham.* Why, look you there! look, how it steals away!
> My father, in his habit as he lived!
> Look, where he goes, even now out at the portal! [*Exit* Ghost.
> *Qu.* This is the very coinage of your brain:
> This bodily creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.

So that of the two persons present during the apparition of the spirit, the one who is supposed to have been concerned in the murder is the one to whom the spirit is invisible—which is exactly reversing the order of things in "Macbeth," where Banquo's ghost is visible to him, the murderer, alone. Macbeth's vision would seem to have been rendered preternaturally acute by his crime of murder; but in "Hamlet," if the Queen were guilty, her vision would appear to have been blunted by the same crime in exactly an inverse ratio. Is this probable?

Of the "Macbeth" Coleridge says:—"He has by guilt torn himself live-asunder from nature, and is, therefore, himself in a preternatural state: no wonder, then, that he is inclined to superstition and faith in the unknown of signs and tokens and superhuman agencies."

How opposed is this to the Queen's exclamation to Hamlet:—

> This is the very coinage of your brain:
> This bodily creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.

Words spoken, be it remembered, immediately after her heart had been wrung by the representation of her sins towards her deceased lord, which Hamlet had just before made to her, and which contained the only charge of murder which is ever brought against her.

The conclusion of Hamlet's charge to his mother, like the rebuke which had preceded it, seems to me to point altogether to spouse-breach, and nothing more:—

> And do not spread the compost on the weeds
> To make them ranker.

The murder was done; nothing would make it "ranker."

> Repent what 's past; avoid what is to come:

*i. e.* you have been, up to this time, incestuous; henceforth cease to be so: the crime was even yet in process of commission; not like murder, which, if "past," could have no portion yet "to come" and which might be avoided.

So again:—

> Forgive me this my virtue;
> For in the fatness of these pursy times,
> Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
> Yea, curb and woo, for leave to do him good.

The "fatness of these pursy times" applies very exactly to full-fed, luxurious times ["as fed horses in the morning, every one neighing after his neighbour's wife"], and by no means to bloody times;—he does not characterise them as "bloody" in speaking to her, but only as luxurious. "Vice," too, would be a very tame and mild synonym for murder, and yet is a very exact one for adultery.

So again, in the beginning of his interview he had said:—

> And let me wring your heart; for so I shall
> If it be made of penetrable stuff:
> If damned custom have not braz'd it so,
> That it is proof and bulwark against sense.

What "damned custom" could so "braze" a wife's heart, that her "sense" could not be appealed to, as condemning her for the crime of murder? The words surely can carry no graver meaning than spouse-breach.

So, of this, is her repentance to consist:—

> Good night; but go not to mine uncle's bed.

Still, this, if she were a murderess, would hardly—

> Master the devil, or throw him out
> With wondrous potency.

Which expulsion the "use" of this self-denial is nevertheless to effect. He alludes to her sin throughout as an habitual one, like adultery—which murder, *i.e.* the murder of one individual, of course, could never be:—

> *Qu.* O Hamlet! thou hast cleft my heart in twain.
> *Ham.* O throw away the worser part of it,
> And live the purer with the other half.
> Good night; but go not to mine uncle's bed:
> Assume a virtue, if you have it not.
> That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat
> Of habits, devil, is angel yet in this;
> That to the use of actions fair and good
> He likewise gives a frock or livery
> That aptly is put on: refrain to-night;
> And that shall lend a kind of easiness
> To the next abstinence; the next more easy;
> For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
> And master the devil, or throw him out
> With wondrous potency. Once more, good night.

How differently had he proposed just before to deal with Claudius! No talk of repentance for him! And when he saw him in prayer he decided to spare his life only until he could take it in some act of sin:—

> About some act,
> That has no relish of salvation in it;
> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
> And that his soul may be as damn'd, and black,
> As hell, whereto it goes.

Most unjust both of the Ghost and of Hamlet! for if Claudius and the Queen were both murderers, the Queen, as a sworn wife and help meet, was infinitely the greater criminal of the two.

In alluding to the dead body of Polonius, Hamlet says:—

> For this same lord,
> I do repent: but heaven hath pleas'd it so,—
> To punish me with this, and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister.

He does not include the Queen amongst those against whom he is the appointed instrument of punishment. Claudius would be punished by the death of Polonius, who was his unscrupulous tool, and who may be conjectured to have taken a prominent part in placing him upon the throne, judging from the words of Claudius to Laertes, in act i. sc. 2:—

> What would'st thou beg, Laertes,
> That shall not be my offer, not thy asking?
> The head is not more native to the heart,
> The hand more instrumental to the mouth,
> Than is the throne of Denmark to thy father.
> What would'st thou have, Laertes?

Before taking leave of his mother at the close of the interview, Hamlet says:—

> I must be cruel, only to be kind:
> Thus bad begins, and worse remains behind;

which appears to me to imply, that having reproved the lesser sin, the murderer was yet to be dealt with.

In conclusion, Hamlet says:—

> One word more, good lady.
> *Qu.* What shall I do?
> *Ham.* Not this, by no means, that I bid you do:
> Let the bloat king tempt you again to bed;
> Pinch wanton on your cheek; call you his mouse;
> And let him, for a pair of reechy kisses,
> Or paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers,
> Make you to ravel all this matter out,
> That I essentially am not in madness,
> But mad in craft. * * * * *

To which she replies:—

> Be thou assur'd, if words be made of breath,
> And breath of life, I have no life to breathe
> What thou hast said to me.

Which last words—"What thou hast said to me"—may fairly be taken to include the information of the murder of her former husband, as well as of the affected nature of Hamlet's madness.

Hamlet's interview with his mother being now over, she returns to Claudius, to render to him the account which he must have been so anxiously expecting of its progress and results.

Her sorrowful manner appears, at once, to have attracted the attention of Claudius, and to have excited his suspicion, as is

shown to us in the dialogue which ensues between them (act iv. scene 1) :—

*King.* There 's matter in these sighs; these profound heaves
You must translate; 'tis fit we understand them;
Where is your son?
*Queen.* Ah, my good lord, what have I seen to-night!
*King.* What, Gertrude?

We can imagine this awful "what?" of Claudius; the answer to which was to prove to him whether the vision of discovery presented to his mind by the play-scene were intentional or accidental.

In the Queen's reply to it, we have a proof that she had determined to desert him, and keep Hamlet's counsel; for, instead of revealing to her husband that the murder was discovered, she assures him that her grief proceeds from the fact of Hamlet having slain Polonius, and that Hamlet is—

Mad as the sea and wind, when both contend
Which is the mightier,—

which she then knew was not the case.

Claudius himself was an habitual liar; there is scarcely a word spoken by him—from the beginning of the play, where he expresses his grief at the death of the brother whom he had just murdered, until the end, where he attributes the Queen's accidental death by his own poison to her fainting at the sight of the bloodshed of the fencing-scene—which is not a deliberate lie. His actions also are, without exception, acted lies, and he is made up of schemes, plans, stratagems, and deceptions.

This character makes it very probable that he would judge the conduct of others according to his own rule of action, and would attribute to them the same deceptions which he was always practising.

Seeing the Queen's profound sorrow, and thinking it hardly likely, though affecting to believe it, that it proceeded from the death of Polonius, and knowing, from the play-scene, that it was very probable that Hamlet had suspected the truth with regard to his father's sudden death, and had communicated such suspicion to his mother, I think Claudius came now to the conclusion, the true one, that Hamlet had so communicated it; and I think that this is proved by the fact, that immediately after the Queen's account of her interview with Hamlet, Claudius, when alone, determines on the death of the latter:—

pray you, make haste;
And, England, if my love thou hold'st at aught,
* * * * * * * * *
* * * * thou may'st not coldly set
Our sovereign process, which imports at full,
By letters conjuring to that effect,
The present death of Hamlet. Do it, England;
For like the hectic in my blood he rages,
And thou may'st cure me. Till I know 'tis done,
Howe'er my haps, my joys were ne'er begun.

Whereas, before the play-scene and the subsequent interview between the Queen and Hamlet, Claudius has no intention of murdering him, but meant to send him to England only:—

> For the demand of our neglected tribute:
> Haply, the seas, and countries different,
> With variable object, shall expel
> This something settled matter in his heart;
> Whereon his brains still beating puts him thus
> From fashion of himself.

There is also, I think, a corroborative proof of the same fact, and of Claudius's consequent distrust of his Queen, in a subsequent scene (act iv. scene 7), which takes place between Claudius and Laertes, where Claudius is persuading Laertes not to accuse Hamlet openly of the slaughter of Polonius, but to accede to his scheme for revenging himself more quietly.

In the scene in question, Claudius had just been disappointed of murdering Hamlet in England, by his unexpected return; and the dialogue which ensues between Claudius and Laertes seems to me to make it appear that Claudius was afraid of angering the Queen, for fear lest she should disclose some secret which affected him, and which he thought had now come to her knowledge, as, for example, his murder of her former husband. For when Laertes asks him:—

> But tell me,
> Why you proceeded not against these feats
> So criminal?

he replies:—

> O! for two special reasons,
> Which may to you, perhaps, seem much unsinew'd,
> But yet to me they are strong. The queen, his mother,
> Lives almost by his looks; and for myself
> (My virtue, or my plague, be it either which),
> She 's so conjunctive to my life and soul
> That, as the star moves not but in his sphere,
> I could not but by her. The other motive,
> Why to a public count I might not go,
> Is the great love the general gender bear him:
> Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,
> Work like the spring that turneth wood to stone,
> Convert his gyves to graces; so that my arrows,
> Too slightly timber'd for so loud a wind,
> Would have reverted to my bow again,
> And not where I had aim'd them.

This reply looks to me just like the shuffling answer which Claudius would have made, in case he feared, that if he brought Hamlet to justice for the slaughter of Polonius, and so got rid of him, which was his greatest desire, the Queen would then have disclosed the fact of his having murdered Hamlet's father. Is it likely that the reason he gives is the true one? viz., that he was

indeed so exceedingly tender of his wife's feelings, having then got from her all that he desired, namely, his ambition, crown, and her person—if he had felt assured that, however much he might offend her, she had not got it in her power to inform against him?

It clearly was not love of the Queen, but fear of her, which made him so considerate of Hamlet. Because, directly afterwards, he arranges with Laertes for the "sword unbated" in the fencing-match, which treachery the Queen was not to suspect:—

> I will work him
> To an exploit, now ripe in my device,
> Under the which he shall not choose but fall;
> And for his death no wind of blame shall breathe,
> But even his mother shall uncharge the practice,
> And call it accident.

Now, had his consideration for Hamlet's life proceeded from love of his wife, who, as he pretends, was so "conjunctive to his life and soul," he would just as much have shrunk from causing Hamlet's death by stratagem as by an open legal process. And her death would have been to him a more terrible evil than Hamlet's life. Yet, in the fencing scene (act v. scene 2) the King is so much more intent upon getting Hamlet murdered than sorry to lose his Queen, that when she drinks the poison he merely says,

> Gertrude do not drink! It is the poison'd cup! It is too late.

and immediately concentrates his attention on the fencers, whose remarks he answers quite coolly; and, when the Queen falls, he only adds, "She swoons to see them bleed"—so small was really his love for her.

I think all this tends strongly to corroborate the belief that Claudius feared, from the Queen's manner on returning from her interview with Hamlet, in act iii. scene 4, that she was then acquainted with the fact that her former husband had been murdered by Claudius; in which case, as being safe herself, she would be much more likely to inform against him than if she had been herself also concerned in the crime.

The conjecture which throughout these pages I am inclined to uphold is, that, having her suspicions of foul play aroused by the play scene, the Queen became acquainted with the murder first upon Hamlet's saying to her, "As kill a king and marry with his brother," and entirely so towards the close of that interview; and her immediate relinquishment of Claudius after that interview with Hamlet is strongly corroborative of this conjecture.

Up to the time of her interview with Hamlet we have no reason to suspect that she was acting dishonestly or deceitfully towards Claudius, whatever might be the nature of his conduct in keeping his plans secret from her; but directly after this interview she entirely alters, and flatly lies to him.

I have said that the Queen is acquainted with the fact of the

murder in her interview with Hamlet. His intimation of the fact is contained in his reply to her question, "As kill a king?"—

*Ham.* Ay, lady, 'twas my word.

And again he says:—

This was your husband: look you, now, what follows.
Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear
Blasting his wholesome brother.

And again:—

A murderer, and a villain;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule,
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket!

But to return to the interview between Claudius and his Queen in act iv. scene 1. Being alone together, they indulge in not the least confidence to the effect that they are found out; but she lies to him about Hamlet's madness having caused the death of Polonius; and he, affecting to regard that—as he does there and thereafter—as the great difficulty, tells her how, in consequence of it, he must "ship him (Hamlet) thence;" whereas he had beforehand (act iii. scene 1) arranged with Polonius that, in case the interview should fail, "if she find him not," he should be sent to England, which mission had been determined upon by the King directly after Hamlet's interview with Ophelia (act iii. scene 1), as we know from his soliloquy after it:—

Love! his affections do not that way tend;
I have, in quick determination,
Thus set it down. He shall with speed to England.

He had smelt a rat in Hamlet's dark sayings to Ophelia, which Polonius had not, as we know from the words of the latter:—

It shall do well; but yet I do believe,
The origin and commencement of his grief
Sprang from neglected love.

* * * *

My lord, do as you please.

The fact that Polonius did not see any cause of fear in Hamlet's speeches to Ophelia, as Claudius did, even before the play-scene, leads me to believe that Polonius was not privy to the murder; which belief is confirmed by the fact, that when Hamlet has unintentionally slain Polonius, he makes no allusion to the justice of his fate in punishment of his guilt, but only as a punishment for meddling:—

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell.
I took thee for thy better; take thy fortune:
Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger.

And afterwards he says:—

> For this same lord,
> I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,—
> To punish me with this, and this with me.

Which words he would scarcely have used had Polonius been a party to the murder of his father.

But to return. Had the Queen been participant in the murder, I repeat that Claudius would have said to her after the play-scene, "You see, Hamlet knows of our crime. It is hopeless to try to conceal it as long as he lives. We are half way through the sea of blood: it is impossible to return, and therefore we must go on. It is necessary to our own safety to get Hamlet disposed of in death. Let us do this, and then repent; for which action we shall, otherwise, have no time or opportunity." Like the conclusion of his own soliloquy,—"All may be well."

Yet he does nothing of the sort; but he tells her, as I have before observed, that it is in consequence of the death of Polonius that Hamlet must go to England. He dared never have had the face to do this had the Queen been, jointly with himself, guilty of the murder, and consequently, if he had known that she then knew of it—a knowledge on her part which, as I believe, had then, after passing through all its suspicions gradually, just been perfected in her mind by Hamlet, but which Claudius did not know about, nor dare to substantiate by mentioning it to her, though he might have suspected and feared that Hamlet had informed her of it.

And here I would observe, that throughout the whole play the Queen never appears to have any fear of Hamlet, which the King has almost from the first; or any feeling, but one of unaffected sorrow at his apparent madness; or any abatement of her love for him; or any, the least, wish to get him out of the way in order to her own safety, even after the murder is out.

Thus, in act ii. sc. 2, when Polonius tells the King and Queen that he believes Hamlet to be mad for love of Ophelia, the King expresses no opinion, but asks the Queen, "Do you think 'tis this?" and she answers, "It may be—very likely." The King still keeps silence as to what he thinks, as though he feared it were something much deeper than love.

Again, in act iii. scene 1, the Queen expresses to Ophelia her wish—

> That her good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness,

as though she did really believe it were so, which Claudius never does, knowing better the cause of it. But immediately afterwards —after the great interview between Hamlet and Ophelia—when the King and Polonius meet to compare notes on what they had just heard, the King evidently fears for the cause of Hamlet's conduct:—

There 's something in his soul,
O'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
And, I do doubt, the hatch and the disclose
Will be some danger; which for to prevent
I have in quick determination
Thus set it down. He shall with speed to England.

All along the King fears for himself "the hatch and the disclose" of Hamlet's apparent madness; whereas the Queen has no such fear on her own account; her only fear is for Hamlet himself.

And even after Hamlet's interview with his mother, in which, if ever, he charges her with sharing in the guilt of the murder in the words:—

As kill a king, and marry with his brother,—

even after that the Queen has no wish to get Hamlet out of the way; but, on the contrary, she regrets that he must go:—

*Ham.* I must to England; you know that?
*Queen.* Alack!
I had forgot; 'tis so concluded on.

I cannot but think that if she had understood that Hamlet had been charging her with the crime of murder, she would have been as anxious, or nearly so, for her own safety, to get rid of him as the King was. But she never is so. Her love of him lasts to the very end of the play. Having all through the play protected him, as far she could, from Claudius's anger, so at the last, in the fencing scene, she does all she can to help him;—offers him her "napkin" to "wipe his brow," and the cup which she knew not to be poisoned to drink of; and her last words are, "Oh my dear Hamlet!"

But to return to the alleged evidences against the Queen: the next of which is her soliloquy in act iv. scene 5, where Horatio has just informed her that Ophelia desires to see her, and she, being alone, says:—

To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss;
So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
It spills itself, in fearing to be spilt.

Her accusers allege that this conscious "guilt" is her confession of a share in the murder of her husband.

But there appears to me no reason for thus construing her words. Horatio has just told her that Ophelia is mad, and that she complains of the death of her father, and throws out hints of foul play. The Queen at first refuses to see her, conscious that Polonius had been stabbed by Hamlet, and "interred in hugger-mugger" by Claudius, and that his death had to be accounted for to his daughter and son. Horatio, however, persuades her to see Ophelia; and, whilst he has gone to admit her, the Queen speaks to herself the lines above quoted.

According to my view, the Queen truly enough represents her state of mind. She knew that it was in trying to fathom Hamlet's

wildness that Polonius had met with his death, having ensconced himself behind the arras at the request of Claudius, her husband, and with her own consent. She knew now that Hamlet's wildness was caused by the murder of his father and her frailty; and she had just lately been informed herself that the murder of Hamlet's father had been committed by the man whom she had married. She is stunned and bewildered by these horrible discoveries, and the train of dreadful consequences which have resulted from the indulgence of her criminal love. She reflects that her return of Claudius's unlawful passion had led her into adultery and incest, and stimulated him to the deeper crime of murder—that this frailty and murder caused Hamlet to affect madness, if not actually to suffer it; which madness, in the attempt to find out its cause, led to the slaughter of Polonius; and so to the distraction of Ophelia; and so to the danger to be apprehended from Laertes and the Danish people, if this last slaughter were discovered.

Conscious of her own adultery, and now informed of her first husband's murder, and feeling that so long as she kept silence on this last subject she made herself a participator in it, though after its commission, yet not knowing what to do, and unwilling to denounce the guilt of Claudius, all that she dares to do is to desert his cause and conceal Hamlet's secret, as she promised him to do, and to place her hands before her eyes, in the vain endeavour to exclude from her view the dreadful events which she too surely foresaw must follow in the train of such crimes as these; and feeling above all that, but for her return of Claudius's licentious passion, the worst crime and its consequences would never have followed; feeling, therefore, now more or less involved in all the guilt of Claudius, she shrinks from each noise as the harbinger of some avenging bolt, and naturally enough exclaims:—

> To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss;
> So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
> It spills itself in fearing to be spilt:

feeling assured that her painful consciousness of her own sin, and of her knowledge of the murder by Claudius, was extremely likely to betray her into some evident confession of her guilt and guilty knowledge.

The Queen having held this interview with the distracted Ophelia, who now leaves her, and being left alone with Claudius, he thus proceeds to enumerate their joint sorrows, and the cause of them, in which he persists in his former falsehood, that they are all caused by Hamlet. These are his words:—

> And now, behold,
> O Gertrude, Gertrude!
> When sorrows come, they come not single spies,
> But in battalions. First, her father slain;

Next, your son gone; and he most violent author
Of his own just remove: the people muddied,
Thick and unwholesome in their thoughts and whispers,
For good Polonius' death; and we have done but greenly,
In hugger-mugger to inter him; poor Ophelia
Divided from herself, and her fair judgment,
Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts;
Last, and as much containing as all these,
Her brother is in secret come from France,
Feeds on his wonder, keeps himself in clouds,
And wants not buzzers to infect his ear
With pestilent speeches of his father's death;
Wherein necessity, of matter beggar'd,
Will nothing stick our persons to arraign
In ear and ear. O, my dear Gertrude! this
Like to a murdering piece, in many places
Gives me superfluous death.

Thus, this precious rascal makes out that all these "sorrows" came entirely from Hamlet's lunes, and taunts the Queen with that fact. Now, had she been participant in the murder, I think he would have feared to have done so, lest she should have replied:—"Do not attribute our sorrows to my son;—if he be mad, what made him so? What but that murder into which you tempted me. You are the cause of our sorrows, and not he." I say that Claudius would have feared that the Queen would have defended her so dear son in this way; for he did not know, although he might fear, that Hamlet had then disclosed to her the murder, and his knowledge of it, and had sworn her to secrecy.

Nothing is so certain as criminations and recriminations between fellow-criminals, and attempts, on each side, to throw the burthen of the guilt and its attendant dangers on to the other party. Yet these murderers, if there be two of them, never once fall into this sure necessity; they never endeavour to fasten, each on to the other, the main weight of the crime which is really the source of all their woe—nay, they never even allude to the crime when they are alone together; but affect to believe that their sorrows have all sprung from Hamlet's actions!

In answer to the accusation of her son by Claudius, the Queen makes no reply; and Laertes puts an end to their colloquy, by breaking in to demand revenge for his father's death.

Claudius had before kept up the same farce with the Queen, (act iv. sc. 1), when alone with her, in speaking of Hamlet's murder of Polonius:—

His liberty is full of threats to all;
To you yourself, to us, to every one.
Alas! how shall this bloody deed be answered?
It will be laid to us, whose providence
Should have kept short, restrain'd, and out of haunt,
This mad young man; but so much was our love, &c.

So that he tries to persuade the Queen that Hamlet's dangerousness, on which account he was to go to England, was the result of this madness, and not because he knew of the murder; yet he is dangerous, he seeks to convince her, to her, "to you yourself," and therefore she must prepare to part from him; and this is just the story that he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:—"Hamlet, in madness, hath Polonius slain;" thus putting her, as to confidence, on a level with two spongy courtiers, and trying to make her believe that his lenience to Hamlet proceeds from his great "love" to him, when, all the while, she would, if an accomplice, know that it was attributable only to his fear of discovery by Hamlet.

How absurd and unnecessary would these shams of Claudius have been, had the Queen been participant in his crime! In that case, Claudius would surely have simply told her that Hamlet's death, or at least absence, was essential, as she must see, to their own safety, not on account of his madness, which they both knew was affected, but because the play-scene had proved that Hamlet had found them out.

This entire absence of confidence and sympathy between Claudius and the Queen, throughout the play, appears to me to render it most improbable that, before the play begins, their fates had, by the joint commission of a most awful and bloody crime, been indissolubly knit up together.

Of this, the scene we are now considering is a remarkable instance. Claudius goes on to account for his tenderness in shielding Hamlet from justice:—

> This mad young man. But so much was our love,
> We would not understand what was most fit,
> But, like the owner of a foul disease,
> To keep it from divulging, let it feed
> Even on the pith of life. Where is he gone?
>
> *Qu.* To draw apart the body he hath kill'd;
> O'er whom his very madness, like some ore,
> Among a mineral of metals base,
> Shows itself pure: he weeps for what is done.

Here it will be seen that not only Claudius speaks of Hamlet's actions as the result of madness, which he knew was false, but the Queen repeats the falsehood which she had before uttered, in treating the madness as real: so little confidence existed between them, even when apart from all other people; and when they must both have known, had they been jointly concerned in the murder, that their crime was discovered.

Claudius is also just the man to treat women with contempt, as toys with which to amuse his lighter hours; but never to dream of making them the depositories of so awful a plan as an intention of murder. Thus, he doubts that a man (Hamlet) can possibly be so weak as to have become deranged in his mind for love of so light a thing as woman. "Do you think 'tis this?" and after,

"Love! his affections do not that way tend." He is a mere sensualist, and in this sneer shows that he never believed Hamlet such a fool as to go mad for a woman's love!

This is just the man to keep his own counsel as to murdering a husband—whilst, at the same time, he stains the wife; to admit her to the crime of adultery, whilst the more serious ambition of his life, the crown, he works for alone and without an accomplice, so as not to place his life in the hands of any other person.

As regards the poetical justice of the Queen's fate, *i.e.* her dying by poison—unaccompanied by the supposed commentary on it, contained in Horatio's words:—"so shall you hear of accidental judgments,"—I would only remark, that the conjecture that her death by poison proves her to have been a poisoner, is not a very safe one. The Hamlets, both father and son, die by poison—Polonius is stabbed—and Ophelia, after suffering the agony of many deaths, goes mad and almost destroys herself. What poetical justice is there in the fate of any one of these, or even, perhaps, of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose only crime is that they come "between the pass, and fell incensed points of mighty opposites"? Why, then, apply the rule to the Queen alone, and not to all the other persons of the drama?—unless it can be shown that Horatio's commentary of "accidental judgments" unmistakeably applies to her fate, which I submit cannot be proved to be the case.

To these words I now come—and they constitute the last evidence of the Queen's alleged guilt.

And first, I observe that the word "judgments" is in the plural, which is hardly necessary if the poetical justice of the Queen's fate be the only judgment here alluded to, which is contended to be the case by the supporters of the theory I am now considering; inasmuch as they suppose the other deaths in the course of the tragedy to be described by other words in the paragraph in question.

But can there be fairly assigned to these words, "accidental judgments," the exact signification which has been imposed upon them? They are spoken by Horatio in the last scene of the play:—

> Give order that these bodies
> High on a stage be placed to the view;
> And let me speak to the yet unknowing world,
> How these things came about; so shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning, and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook,
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads.

Now, when the Queen, in dying, says "the drink, the drink! I am poison'd," Hamlet never ventures to "point the moral" of such her death, but calls it "villainy" and "treachery," very different to his description of the fate of Claudius, in being stabbed with the

poisoned rapier:—"Then, venom, to thy work," which is in some editions—"Then, venom, to thy venom," which may remind us of the Ghost's words applied to Claudius:—"The serpent that did sting thy father's life, now wears his crown."

So also does Hamlet "point the moral" of the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, such as it is:—"Their defeat does by their own insinuation grow;" and Laertes does it for himself in dying—"I am justly killed with mine own treachery;" and adds, of Claudius, "He is justly served; it is a poison temper'd by himself."

No one ventures to hint that the Queen is "justly served": and the death of Laertes may be called, with quite as much propriety as that of the Queen, an "accidental judgment"; although he is also taken as a "woodcock in his own springe," as also is Claudius.

I would also suggest that the speaker of these words, "accidental judgments," is not Hamlet, but Horatio. Did he know of the Queen's supposed guilt of murder, which alone could make her fate so poetically just? If so, who told him? When first the Ghost appears to Hamlet, the latter refuses to tell Horatio the communication just made to him by the apparition:—"For your desire to know what is between us, o'ermaster it as you may"; and all that we hear afterwards is, that before the play-scene, Hamlet says:—

> One scene of it comes near the circumstance
> Which I have told thee of my father's death:
> I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
> Observe mine uncle.

And Horatio replies:—

> Well, my lord:
> If he steal ought the whilst the play is playing,
> And 'scape detecting, I will pay the theft.

"Which I have told thee"; but he does not tell us how much he had told Horatio. But it seems to me certain, even if Hamlet ever believed his mother guilty of the murder, that he never disclosed such a belief to Horatio; because, as I have shown, the text makes no mention of any such disclosure, and especially because, after Hamlet's narration of the "circumstance which I have told thee of my father's death," and in reply to his directions to watch Claudius during the play-scene, Horatio makes no proposition to watch the Queen also; which plan would surely have occurred to him, even if Hamlet had been reluctant to suggest it.

All that we know further of Hamlet's disclosures to Horatio is contained in his words (act v. se. 2):—

> Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon,
> He that hath killed my king, and whor'd my mother,
> Popp'd in between the election and my hopes;
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
> And with such cozenage, is 't not perfect conscience,
> To quit him with this arm? and is 't not to be damn'd
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In farther evil?

Here is no word of the Queen's participation in the murder disclosed to Horatio—no allusion to it—the whole tone of it almost, if not entirely, precludes the possibility of the existence of guilt in any other person than Claudius; and, yet, these words are spoken by Hamlet in the very last scene of the play, and when he knew all that he ever did know of the commission of the crime. Claudius is the "canker," the foul plague-spot, which must be cut out, and his place cauterized, for the safety of the other members of the human family. He is still, "He that hath kill'd my king, and whor'd my mother."

When, then, is Horatio informed of the Queen's blood-guilt, in order to make his words, "accidental judgments," apply to her fate? Never, that we can detect; and Hamlet's last charge to him to clear his name, does not need that Horatio should have known of it:—

> Horatio, what a wounded name,
> Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
> Tell my story—
> * * * * * * *

And again:—

> Horatio, I am dead;
> Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright
> To the unsatisfied.

Now, how was his name wounded? Who were the persons whose deaths might be in any way attributed to Hamlet's conduct? They were:—

1. Claudius.
2. Polonius.
3. Laertes.
4. Ophelia.
5. Guildenstern.
6. Rosencrantz.

The deaths of these, especially 2, 5, and 6, needed explanation to the "unsatisfied"; not so the death of the Queen, of which Laertes with his dying breath had publicly affixed the guilt to Claudius, and she had confirmed it in the words:—

> The drink, the drink: I am poison'd.

I think all this proves that Horatio knew nothing of the Queen's alleged participation in the murder, and that, consequently, he could not have alluded to the poetical justice of her fate in his words, "accidental judgments." In addition to which, there would appear to have been no necessity for Horatio, in "telling" Hamlet's "story," to vindicate him from any concern in the death of the Queen.

Having now considered all the alleged evidences of the Queen's guilt, I would remark that there is one other consideration which ought to have a place in our judgment upon the subject, and it is one which is, I think, entirely in her favour.

It is this,—What is the character of the Queen for humanity and womanly tenderness throughout the play?

The first witness I propose to call is the murdered King himself; and I think that he, so "radiant an angel," would not have been so fond of her had she been a hard, unfeeling woman; his very protection of her implies the same fact, as described in Hamlet's words:—

> So loving to my mother
> That he might not let e'en the winds of heaven
> Visit her face too roughly.

These words describe her as a tender, delicately-nurtured woman, unfit for deeds of blood.

My next witness will be Hamlet himself, the basis of whose character, and, in fact, a main pre-condition of whose derangement, is the exquisite sensibility of his affections. Such a mind would never have been formed in childhood and boyhood but by a mother worthy of such a son, and never by a hard, unfeeling woman. Nor, on the other hand, could he, the lover of the gentle Ophelia, have loved his mother so dearly had she been such; and it is his very love of her, and faith in her, which, on the discovery of her frailty, so entirely shakes his confidence in all apparent virtue. If she, so dearly loved, were bad, who could be good?

My next and last witness must be the Queen herself. How does she conduct herself in troublous times, and when bloodshed is likely to ensue? Her greatest anxiety appears to be to prevent it. Thus, she does when the incensed Laertes rushes into the presence of Claudius to demand revenge for the death of Polonius, when she exclaims—

> Calmly, good Laertes;

and tries to exculpate Claudius from all share in the death of Polonius:—

> Dead,
> But not by him.

Thus, she does when Hamlet and Laertes quarrel in Ophelia's grave, and she prays Laertes—

> For love of God, forbear him.

Thus, again, before the fencing-scene, she requests Hamlet to use "courteous entertainment" to Laertes, which he understands to mean, to seek his pardon before the commencement of the fencing-match; and her grief at the death of Polonius accords with this view:—

> O what a rash and bloody deed is this!

Again, her deep sympathy in Ophelia's sad sorrow; her wish that her darling son should marry a woman of so soft and tender a character—a wish expressed both to Ophelia during her life, and addressed to her corpse after her death in the beautiful epitaph spoken over her open grave:—

Sweets to the sweet: farewell! [*Scattering flowers.*
I hoped thou should'st have been my Hamlet's wife,
I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
And not to have strew'd thy grave.

Her intense love for Hamlet throughout, and not forgotten in her dying moments—and her agonized acknowledgment of her crime of infidelity—all appear to me to show her to be a naturally tender and feeling woman.

Compare her with Shakspeare's blood-stained women—which of them is she like? Lady Macbeth? Regan? Goneril? Tamora?

Her accusers will tell me—"Very true; she was a kind and tender woman, 'till led away by Claudius; but then 'the angel, tenderness,' gave way to the 'devil, lust,' and, in her anxiety to compass her desire, she forgot her usual kindness." But, even if this were so, it would not account for her indifference to her crime of blood-guilt, after the commission of it, until stabbed by Hamlet's dagger-words.

Shakspeare has told us in the "Lucrece," that so soon as "drunken desire has vomited his receipt," *i. e.* as the desire is gratified, the mental vision regains its power.

Yet this tender woman, as her accusers must needs suppose, bore about with her this dreadful secret, unoppressed by the burthen, or all but so: and even endured to look into the mirror of her crime unmoved, whilst the crafty and bloody Claudius, sitting by her side and beholding the same scene, was forced into a betrayal of his guilt!

Yet, a similar secret drove Lady Macbeth, all "unsexed" though she were, into madness and suicide! And those accursed monsters Regan and Goneril go on to prey upon each other, so fulfilling the evil augury contained in their first acts of cruelty; whilst the conduct of Tamora is consistent throughout, and its vileness is unrelieved by any tender or womanly feeling.

If therefore the character of the Queen be considered, apart, so far as it may, from the question of the murder of her husband, it shows her to be, I think, a tender and humane woman, very averse to bloodshed of every sort, and interposing on every possible occasion to prevent it.

If this be the case, it is entitled to the grave consideration of those who desire to pronounce upon the question of her participation in, or innocence of, the murder of her husband. And although the fact of such her natural disposition may not be thought a proof that she was not participant in the murder, it is, I think, a great evidence, that had she been guilty, she would most surely have been more oppressed with the dreadful consciousness of her guilt than she was before the acting of the play-scene, and before Hamlet's interview with her; before either of which events we have a soliloquy of guilt, and great fears of the "hatch and the disclose" of Hamlet's madness on the part of the crafty and

deceitful Claudius, who nevertheless is much less likely to have been oppressed with such a consciousness of guilt and distressed by such fears than the Queen is, inasmuch as he is so inured to deeds of blood, that when the Queen falls down poisoned, and by him, during the fencing-scene, he shows neither alarm nor regret—only, "it is too late," and who, further, plots to murder Hamlet himself, without the least compunction.

Is there, moreover, any instance in Skakspeare, or in real life, of a person beginning with such a bloody deed as the murder of a husband, and not being urged on by the dangers resulting from it into the commission of further crimes of the same sort, to ensure her safety? Is not this the certain consequence of such a crime as murder? Is it not so with Macbeth? Iago? Lear's daughters? Aaron? and Claudius himself?

Let us finally inquire what proofs we have of the guilt of Claudius, and then compare these proofs with the alleged proofs against the Queen:—

1. We have his motives to the crime:—

> Since I am still possess'd
> Of those effects for which I did the murder,
> My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

2. Hamlet's prophetic feeling:—

> O! my prophetic soul,—my uncle!

3. The Ghost's direct and positive assurance —

> Thus was I, sleeping, by a brother's hand
> Of life, of crown, of queen, at once dispatch'd.

4. Hamlet's belief of this assurance—"bloody, bawdy villain!" and his disclosure to Horatio of the fact, and his determination to have the "mousetrap" acted, in order to "catch the conscience of the king."

5. Claudius's soliloquy of guilt before the acting of the "mousetrap," *i.e.* his confession of the constant hypocrisy of his conduct in the words:—

> How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience, &c.

6. The play-scene:—Lucianus pours in the poison while the Player-Queen is absent; and without, so far as we can see, any collusion on her part.

7. Claudius's "occulted guilt unkennels itself"; he is "frighted with false fire"; in the play-scene, "the king rises."

8. Hamlet's and Horatio's observation of such his betrayal of his guilt; and their remarks upon it.

9. His confession—"O! my offence is rank," &c.

10. Hamlet's accusation of him to the Queen:—

> A murderer and a villain.

11. His plots to murder Hamlet, his discoverer, in England and in the fencing-scene.

12. Hamlet's farewell words to him:—"Die, thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane."

Just compare these proofs with the alleged proofs of the Queen's guilt, as stated at the commencement of my paper, and especially remember that of those eleven proofs against her, no less than five reach us through Hamlet's lips (four out of those five, through no other channel), which five, moreover, contain all that is really of any consequence against her; and are numbered 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8.

If I had to narrrate in prose the argument of the play, so far as it affects the subject of my paper, I should do it in the following manner:—

Before it opens, Claudius and the Queen have been guilty of adultery; and Claudius alone of murder.

The Queen's uneasiness and anxiety are sufficiently accounted for by her remembrance that she had sinned most grievously against her former husband during his lifetime, and was insulting his memory, when dead, by her incestuous marriage with his brother.

Her uneasiness about the changed state of Hamlet proceeds from her belief that it was occasioned in part by her "o'erhasty marriage," coupled with her recollection that he had been the most often present witness of her expressed great love for his deceased father, as he has told us in the words:—

> Why, she would hang on him
> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on.

Also, from her reflection that she had bastardized and injured Hamlet, as far as a mother who is subsequently faithless to her husband can do; and, moreover, that Claudius was keeping him from the crown. Also, from her great natural fondness for Hamlet, and the consequent conflict in her mind in attempting to reconcile her grief at his changed state with her desire to continue in her incestuous union with Claudius, and her wish that the latter should retain his crown and kingdom.

Seeing her own sin of fickleness mirrored in the play-scene, and her consequent infidelity suggested, she might naturally conclude that, as she recognised that part of the representation, Claudius, as the cause of his visible alarm, might have recognised his part in the poisoning scene; which suspicion would be strengthened by her remembrance of the very sudden death of her late husband.

Thus, "in great amazement and admiration," as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern describe her directly after the play-scene—"amazed" at the dreadful fear suggested to her by the play-scene; for, if one part were true, why not the other?—amazed at the fear that her husband had been murdered, and that she had linked herself to the

murderer—Hamlet comes and confirms to her this awful suspicion, and leaves in her mind no doubt of its truth.

Upon this, for the first time, she revolts from Claudius and sides with Hamlet.

Upon this—

> To her sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.

Claudius, now, fearing her discovery, and evidently suspecting it, treats her with even less confidence than before; plans to murder her son; and, when the poison mixed for Hamlet is swallowed by her, cares nothing about it, and hopes yet to live himself:—

> O! yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt;

doubtless not sorry that she, whom he suspects to be now informed of his crime, is removed by death.

And, finally, tastes of his own venom; and—

> The rest is——silence.

I have thus endeavoured to show that, if the innocence of the Queen cannot be proved, still the balance of evidence is in her favour.

In conclusion, I desire to remind my readers of the fact, that, although the received text of "Hamlet" is derived mainly from the quarto of 1604, the title-page of which declares that it is "enlarged to almost as much again as it was," yet there exists one copy of an edition dated in 1603. This earlier edition gives a very imperfect idea of the play as it now exists, and differs from the received text, especially, on the subject of my paper. In the interview between Hamlet and his mother, after the acting of the play-scene, Hamlet speaks much more explicitly of the foul play attending his father's death, and of the perpetrator of the crime:—

> And he is dead.
> Murder'd, damnably murder'd,—this was your husband—
> • • • • • • • • • •
> Ah! have you eyes, and can you look on him
> That slew my father, and your dear husband,
> To live in the incestuous pleasure of his bed?

And the Queen, in the same scene, declares to her son:—

> But, as I have a soul, I swear by heaven
> I never knew of this most horrid murder.

To which Hamlet, alluding to his intention to slay Claudius, replies:—

> And, mother, but assist me in revenge,
> And in his death your infamy shall die.

Whereupon she rejoins:—

> I will conceal, consent, and do my best,
> What stratagem soe'er thou shalt devise.

There is also, in the edition I am now quoting, a scene which does not exist at all in the received text. It takes place between the Queen and Horatio, after Hamlet's escape from the embassy to England; and in it Horatio narrates to the Queen the plot of Claudius to murder Hamlet, and the escape of the latter at the expense of Rosencrants and Guildenstern. When the Queen hears of her husband's plot she says, in speaking of Claudius:—

> Then I perceive there 's treason in his looks
> That seem'd to sugar o'er his villainy;
> But I will soothe and please him for a time,
> For murderous minds are always jealous.

She also directs Horatio to bid Hamlet

> awhile
> Be wary of his presence, lest that he
> Fail in that he goes about,—

alluding to his intention to kill Claudius.

As regards the authenticity of this edition of 1603, Mr. Charles Knight, in his "Studies of Shakspeare," has declared his belief that it "gives us the play as originally written by Shakspeare," who, he considers, afterwards elaborated this first conception into the glorious tragedy which we now possess. Mr. Collier, with far greater probability, conjectures that it was compiled from a short-hand writer's notes, and that Shakspeare is in no way responsible for its imperfections. At the same time, Mr. Collier says, "It is of high value in enabling us to settle the text of various important passages;" and one particular stage direction, which occurs in no other edition of the play, he believes, with great probability, to carry out the author's intention with respect to the appearance of the Ghost in the scene in question.

If we accept Mr. Knight's belief, I think it sets the matter at rest as to Shakspeare's intention with regard to the Queen's innocence of the crime of murder, and proves that she first became acquainted with such crime in her interview with Hamlet after the play-scene.

But, if we prefer Mr. Collier's far more probable conjecture, even then the edition of 1603 shows to us the impression produced upon the mind of an attentive spectator by the performance of the play by a body of actors, one of whom was William Shakspeare himself; and who can doubt that he, who in this very play has given to actors for all time such minute directions how to "speak the speech" appointed to each one, and has directed them to "suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that they o'erstep not the modesty of nature"—who can doubt that he also directed the living actors of his own company to impart to each one of the scenes of his masterpiece, which

they were enacting in concert, the exact tone and colour which he desired it to possess?

It may also be remembered that in the interview-scene between Hamlet and his mother, in which occur the passages which differ so materially from the received text, Shakspeare himself was actually present in the part of the Ghost, which he enacted. This renders it probable that the other actors in the same scene would be more than ever careful to observe the directions which they might have received from the author of the play, as to the colour which he desired should be imparted to the scene in question. It is not likely that the short-hand writer, from whose notes I am supposing the edition of 1603 to have been taken, should have completed such notes during the course of one representation of the play. Most probably he saw it acted many times; and the version which he has given us of the interview-scene between Hamlet and his mother may, therefore, fairly be accepted as showing the impression made upon his mind by the manner in which the actor who personated the Queen understood and represented the part habitually, even although the words which the short-hand writer has put into the mouth of the Queen were not actually uttered by the actor of the part, or written by Shakspeare, but merely the embodiment of the impression left upon the mind of the spectator by the performance of an actor who was sustaining the part of the Queen under the eye of Shakspeare himself.

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